Monsieur de Balzac entertains a visitor.

by

Pierre Boving.

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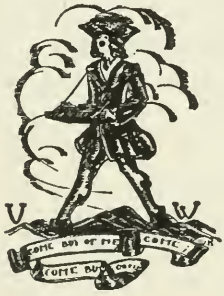

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MONSIEUR DE BALZAC
ENTERTAINS A VISITOR

MONSIEUR DE BALZAC ENTERTAINS A VISITOR

I.—*The Meeting*

ANDERING along the quays Charles glanced perfunctorily at the bookstalls. Now and then a colored print caught his eye or a Watteau engraving, and he stopped to examine it through his eyeglass. Listlessly he would inquire the price and then make no further sign of interest, passing on to the next bouqinist. As he strolled along, using delaying tactics with himself, snatching at every least excuse for not going home after a night spent in the rue Breda with Privat d'Anglemont, the tall dark Creole dandy, he turned from the bookstalls to the passing market gardeners carrying deep panniers of vegetables on their heads, and crying their regular morning cry under the windows.

The men, he noted, were picturesquely dressed, more tastefully than their wives who trailed

behind: broad-brimmed hat, blue woolen stockings, heavy clogs, blue pantaloons, their necks swathed in a Rouen handkerchief. He was passing the Institute now with its onion-shaped dome. The cries were a little behind him. It occurred to him that the Parisians were an epigrammatic race. Off-hand, they invented a neat tag for everything that cropped up in their lives. Voltairism? The caricaturists were quick to seize on these tags and exploit them in the newspapers. This man with his Rouen handkerchief, crying his musical cry under the windows, had his apt sobriquet too: he was known as the "good Jean Flottard."

As Charles approached the Pont Neuf, he made out at some distance a short stout man buttoned up rather dashingly in a blue coat. He wore dark trousers to match, boot-straps, and a white piqué waistcoat. Taking small self-conscious steps he drew nearer. The two men were only several feet apart now and Charles caught the glint of a heavy Venetian chain suspended like a miniature cable across the mound of the stomach.

The stout man, dandified but obviously most uncomfortable, carried a cane with a jewelled head. As he moved along he pumped it up and down like

the baton, hardly more dazzling perhaps, of a drum major. But this fat fellow was a bit too dwarfish to play the rôle with success. Ventre de Saint Gris! It was the Louis Boulanger portrait of the Salon of 1837 come to life, here on the quayside, in the blue morning air! Come to life, that is, through a caricature of Charles' friend, Honoré Daumier. Clesinger had made a statue of the fat fellow too, and here it was transmogrified, buttoned up, divested of its monk's cowl.

The man was dandified, Charles thought, but in reality badly dressed. His gait was pompous and he carried the jewel-headed cane—an unforgiveable thing in a gentleman, Charles reflected—with ostentation. He flaunted it at you. He was not quite at his ease, Charles also noted, in his bottle-blue coat with the large gold buttons, a coat made fashionable by Goethe. But Charles pictured the fat fellow making the most of his blue coat in the Bois, riding in his fashionable landau recently acquired, drawn by highbred horses with tufted pompons stuck in their ears.

Charles could not help smiling. The stormy meeting with his family, which he had foreboded until now, was purged from his mind by the

apparition of this pompous stout little man. He started to visualize the white horses leaving the porte-cochère of Les Jardies, the new house in Ville d'Avray which the novelist had built for himself.

Yet Charles had pictured him somewhat different. From all the portraits and newspaper cartoons he gathered he would be a stout little man certainly, but not so insignificant. He should have seemed more Napoleonic after his hard battles with recalcitrant books, novels of French life that shook the world. Dishevelled black hair, dampish; eyes pouchy from lack of sleep, his body small and pudgy: he should have looked like that and more. But he *did* look like that, save that his hair was pomaded, and he wore a bottle-blue coat with large gold buttons instead of a white dressing gown, as the cartoons usually portrayed him, inflexible around his body like a stone cassock worn by a saint on a frieze.

There could be no mistake about it. This was Monsieur de Balzac, as bizarre as a dodo: an ungainly little man with a foppish air, oddly overdressed, not quite at his ease but trying to make the best of it.

Charles laughed a low laugh at first. It was hard to choke back the easy jet of laughter that surged within him. He tried to confront the novelist with a grave face, the lips compressed tightly, but in the end he succumbed to the irresistible impulse. Of its own accord the laughter burst from him. Laughter became a free agent. The figure was comic. If you looked at it long enough you could not help seeing that in it tension overcame elasticity, and this was the secret of comedy. In the little fat fellow the tension of fierce ambition combatted the man's own elastic powers which, as it happened, did not include taste, certainly not the taste for dress.

Leaning on his own stick, slim and reedlike, Charles stationed himself insolently in front of the "great man." The "great man" scowled. Charles then gave himself up to unreserved laughter. The peals grew louder and louder, then shriller and threatened soon to drown out the whole street, to vie with the rumbling of the drays and carriages and Jean Flottard's musical cry.

Indecisive, wobbling a bit, Monsieur de Balzac paused in his tracks. He scowled and stared at the bold young man whom he had never before laid

eyes on. Who was this insolent youngster with the air of a British under-secretary? His pudgy face crimsoned. The space between his brows contracted. Then he raised his studded cane. . . .

"What's the meaning of this, monsieur?" he cried.

By this Charles was deep in another access of laughter. But he recovered himself and stammered an apology. He introduced himself: Charles Baudelaire. Monsieur de Balzac raised his eyebrows. Monsieur de Balzac had met his mother, Madame Jacques Aupick, many times in society and as for himself, he was a great admirer of Monsieur de Balzac's novels. On a recent voyage to Calcutta, where he had gone to sell livestock to the British colonials, he had carried in his trunk a complete set of the *Comédie Humaine*. His laughter . . . that unfortunate outbreak . . . He hoped Monsieur de Balzac would forgive him. It was a nervous attack which he painfully regretted. Several doctors had pronounced it incurable and he sincerely hoped that Monsieur de Balzac, who was known to be a man of imagination, good sense, and humor, would not take it amiss.

Charles accompanied these contrite words with a low salaam.

After an embarrassed silence he added:

"Champfleury and Gerard de Nerval have promised to make me known to you, sir."

"Ah, they're friends of yours?"

"Yes. And so is Privat d'Anglemont."

"Privat too . . . ? Ah, Privat! The man's an original character. Do you know, he resembles Dumas a lot. He must be more than half negro. An original character!"

"Privat and I, as a matter of fact, spent last night wandering about Paris—unknown Paris."

"Did you come across anything exciting? Will Privat ever finish his book on the underworld of Paris? I hope so. It must have been instructive to loaf about with Privat."

"Not very thrilling, monsieur," Charles replied. "Not what *you* would call thrilling. Out of boredom I cut the throat of Victorine, Theo Gautier's former mistress, you know. They told me he had married a Grisi and so—"

"You did—what?"

"I killed her for Gautier's sake, at least in part. She's the clinging sort and he did not know how to

get rid of her. Will you walk with me a bit? I'd like to tell you how it happened."

Monsieur de Balzac, more amused than annoyed now, allowed his arm to be taken and they walked along the quays. Nervously and quickly, almost running his words together, Charles prattled on.

"As I told you, my name's Charles Baudelaire. My mother is a Dufays. That's the name I used for my first poems. I'm the son of a famous Breton priest who fought against Napoleon in the Vendée. Some day, monsieur, when you have a moment or so to spare, I'd like to go into his story for you. It's an epic, a saga. You could easily make a novel out of it."

"The Vendée has always fascinated me," the novelist replied, but tentatively. He studied the cool young man. "Privat," he went on slowly, "has made a study of the Vendéen in Paris for me. Did you come across any Vendéen last night?"

"Ah, last night!" Charles repeated. "Not many. I was bored. Privat took pity on me. My scabies gave me a lot of trouble earlier in the evening. Just to take my mind off them, Privat suggested that we loaf about. Then suddenly I

recalled a popular superstition of the Middle Ages, that you can cure the itch by slaughtering a virgin. And so I chose Victorine—"

"A virgin—?" Monsieur de Balzac laughed heartily and the echo seemed to rumble in his chest.

"You're a fantaisist," the novelist commented goodnaturedly.

"For amusement only," Charles returned. "I cannot sell my dreams to a buying public, nor my vices, like Paul de Kock. That is why I'm a poet."

"Of course you're a poet. I've heard of you. Privat has spoken of you often. You make a virtue of bohemianism, I hear. Now let me give you a piece of advice, monsieur. I speak from experience. Keep away from the professional bohemians, from Mürger and the rest. Keep away from their Mimis, their Margots—keep away from women! Good or bad. At least while you're working. Every affair you have means at least one dead book, perhaps a masterpiece lost to the world."

"Books—books," repeated Charles. "Ah, well, if you write books, you risk not finishing them through a love affair or a bad stomach. But I do

not write them. My manicures are too exacting. I cannot find time to write books, sir."

Monsieur de Balzac glanced sidewise at the impertinent young man. With a long careful appraisal he took in the immaculate attire: the fawn trousers, the yellow gloves and the neatly-tied cravat over the blue linen shirt. Presently with a broad smile, the novelist said:

"Will you do me the honor of dining with me, Monsieur Baudelaire?"

Charles coughed into his palm. He hesitated. "Let me see . . . Why yes, I shall be delighted to dine with you."

The novelist raised his stick, and hailed a passing fiacre. In a few minutes they found themselves seated opposite each other at the Café de Paris. Monsieur de Balzac's heavy-jowled dark face hung over the white napery and the crystal. His quick dark eyes rested on the pallid face of the young man opposite him.

Charles was altogether unconscious of the novelist's careful scrutiny. He was busily studying the menu through his monocle, and while Monsieur de Balzac stammered and tried to make suggestions he coolly ordered an elaborate dinner,

course by course, and chose, without consulting the amazed novelist who was his host, what he considered to be an excellent Bordeaux.

II.—*The Visit*

The bell sounded.

A servant lazily opened the garden gate and from his comfortable rattan chair on the terrace Monsieur de Balzac watched the finically dressed young man as he strolled up the main path. Extraordinary costume: it was flamboyant and severe at the same time. M. de Balzac despaired. He could never achieve such perfection in his own attire.

Charles wore a black frockcoat disproportionately widened at the torso. The golden yellow cravat rested as lightly as a hovering butterfly on the pale blue shirt, unstarched and smooth. The basque cuffs protruded from the coatsleeves. He was wearing the tall hat with the wide-awake brim . . . Monsieur de Balzac had ordered a similar one from Giverne several days earlier, but it did not become him—made him look ridiculous in fact.

A good part of his essential distinction, the novelist realized, lay in the young man's bearing. A remarkable fellow! He moved just like an

automaton set in motion by unearthly forces: his joints seemed to creak; only they didn't creak. The fellow was bent, apparently, on showing a series of different silhouettes of himself as he walked.

It was the same when he talked and when he made gestures. Monsieur de Balzac had observed it at the Café de Paris when, recently, they had dined together. The gestures reminded him of the new optical telegraph on the top of Saint-Sulpice: first one semaphoric signal and then another: tension, message; and when the tension was broken, a rebuilding, a fresh tension and a new message to the world. Simply weird!

M. de Balzac greeted Charles affably, and indicated a green-painted chair near him. They began talking without aim or goal, and almost at once the novelist was struck by the erudition the young man displayed.

Soon the mundane or inveterately curious side of M. de Balzac's character asserted itself. Like a surgeon in a Napoleonic regiment he questioned Charles about his diet, his health, his habits and even about his relations with women. When he

threw out questions about General Jacques Aupick, the poet's stepfather, Charles grew suddenly mute. He coughed into his hand.

The novelist wore a white Dominican cashmere robe, cream colored trousers, and red morocco slippers embroidered with gold, a gift from the Duchess d'Abrantes. A Venetian gold chain swung across his stomach, and from this dangled a gold penknife and a pair of scissors.

The novelist made minute inquiries about Charles' voyage to the East, of which his secretary and friend, Jules Chamfleury, had told him. Champfleury had said that Charles liked to embellish his Eastern trip. His host wanted to know the customs of the people, their dress, the flora, fauna and topography of the country. Would it have been hard for Napoleon (assuming of course he had wanted to) to conquer it?

Charles replied evasively in a level voice:

"You see, monsieur, I traveled little. And all I know of the native customs is what I observed from the black giantess I lived with. She was an excellent cook, especially of native dishes."

M. de Balzac narrowed his eyes and suddenly sat up.

"What kind of coffee did she make?" he demanded.

"She made it as they do in the East—very thick and black, sweetened with sirop. But we preferred opium and hashish to the coffee bean."

"Didn't the stuff weaken you?"

"No, I merely had dreams."

"You mean you lost control of your mind and will?"

"Not exactly that," Charles returned. "All objects and sensations were pleasantly heightened."

Rumpling the skin between his black feathery brows, the novelist leaned forward in his chair and admonished him: "It's a bad habit, young man. If you keep it up, it will emasculate your work. Be sensible. I hope the use of drugs was only a brief affectation."

"Why do you call it that, monsieur?" Charles asked.

"I object to the use of drugs because they gain a mastery over man. Man is, after all, lord of creation by his will power, his intelligence."

"Aren't there several kinds of intelligence?" Charles asked.

"That's beside the point. Whenever a man

abdicates the supremacy of his will, as under the influence of drugs or of women, he is as good as lost. This new-fangled theory of sensation as the highest good in life leaves me cold. No—it makes me angry, monsieur! Drift, say the sensationalists. Why drift? When you can triumph and exult in the use of the mind God gave you. The recent findings of Mesmer—you know Mesmer, I hope—show that nothing can resist the human will. The will is bound up with the logic of nature."

"Logic of nature!" Charles repeated dryly. He thoughtfully drew his gloves through a tightly closed hand. "Where is it? What is it? Nature must always be whipped like a disobedient mistress. Look about you, monsieur: Nature is slovenly, inexact. For every gift or talent she allows us, man must find another, a better one. He must even find his own will. Don't we create the logic of nature ourselves, Monsieur de Balzac?"

The novelist peered closely at the young man who talked in a calm persuasive voice, never too loud and yet never faltering. This remarkable exhibition of self-mastery in one so young—he could not have been more than twenty-three or

four—made him gasp. Then, after a pause, he said:

"You're a philosopher, I see, Monsieur Baudelaire."

"No, a dandy. An artifiicial philosopher. The word dandy should be very sparingly used. It implies moral character of the highest order, a subtle intelligence . . . "

"To be used for what end?"

"To arrive at the meaning of things."

Balzac laughed hilariously, loosening his girth. He toyed with his gold penknife. "Very clever indeed. Ah, but it's what you try to accomplish with will-power that counts in the long run. Look! Morality implies a good end, doesn't it? Mon Dieu, M. Baudelaire, I'm tired of explaining myself to people who won't understand." He paused and sighed.

"Just look at me. I've worked hard. I've failed in politics. The Academy won't have me. How can I make my will felt, how can I impress my superiority? That's my problem. Shall I achieve that in the arms of a woman. Bah! That's far too easy. I leave that to weaklings." He dropped his eyes. "But I am tired, ah, very tired."

Charles gazed at the portly, white-stoled figure. For a moment he was embarrassed. He was at a loss what to reply. He was in the habit of saying, much later, that there are critical moments when the ego faces itself. In such moments commonsense goes up in a whirl of smoke, and with it go the mental savings, as it were, of a lifetime. And then either the devil or God (it doesn't matter which) slips in. Such moments, indeed, offer them their best chance.

Charles merely said after a silence: "Yours is a doctrine of strict commonsense, monsieur. You think along material lines."

"All thinking is just commonsense, monsieur," Balzac quickly replied.

"Yours, then, if you will let me say so, is a material sense. Commonsense is the weakest link in our human logic, taking it age by age. The mind varies its commonsense from age to age, doesn't it? But its form of thinking stays unalterably the same. Ventre Saint Gris! That's very monotonous for original minds, monsieur—like yours and mine."

"*Hein?*" Monsieur de Balzac blinked. "What's that you say? Form of thinking the same! But

you must try to control human destiny. What? Try to do something despite the odds against you. Accomplish your work. Thinking is barren, sir, without action."

"I prefer suffering, monsieur . . . "

"You prefer it! Bah!"

"Suffering," Charles went on, "I mean, as a form of passive action. Have you no place in your system for suffering, for conscience, for the terrible battle or agony of the spirit? Why? *Parbleu,* monsieur, the commonsense people in everyday affairs are the inspiration fools in art and the instinct people in love." Charles made a gesture of intolerable nausea.

"*Basta!*" he resumed, "They're quite impossible. They make up the bulk of the newspaper readers. Is it worthwhile imposing your will on *that* pulpy mass?"

"No, no," returned the novelist, wearily shaking his head. "I don't follow you."

"Why not the *Comédie Humaine* for itself?" Charles asked. "Why not hug your greatness to yourself? Be a saint. The saint can only be a saint to himself alone!"

The servant brought the coffee urn and Mon-

sieur de Balzac poured out the thick viscous brown fluid. He sipped the beverage with a lingering relish. When he had emptied the cup, he stirred the lees at the bottom with the tip of his tongue.

After tasting it gingerly, Charles pushed his coffee cup aside and said:

"If we could only give the lie to falseness, monsieur. If we could only be sensitive every minute of the day, of our lives! Combat human stupidity! Be stoical! That's what I mean by dandy."

"I see what you mean," the novelist replied with little conviction in his tone, "but that sort of thing doesn't suit me. You see, I'm much older than you." He poured another cup of the brown beverage from the silver urn.

The dusk came quickly. Charles rose to go. The trees in the garden caught the iridescent glow and poured it like strange water around the edges of the flat plane-tree leaves, outlining their crispness.

As Charles walked down the gravel path, striding with jerky movements, he paused before an old untidy tree near the garden wall. It was a spacious walnut tree and around its base lay a motley pile of rubbish. Oddly incongrous, that, in a neat

garden, he thought. He remembered now: there was a tale connected with it: the ground on which Les Jardies was built had once been the village dumping ground. The town from time immemorial had cast its garbage at the foot of that walnut tree. There had been some litigation about this privilege between the novelist and the villagers, and the latter had won. Poor Balzac! Always trying to be a gentleman and never quite succeeding!

Left alone, the novelist sat motionless, with somber-gazing eyes, nervously fingering the gold paper-knife that dangled from his chain-belt. The sky was crowded with shadows. A pungent freshness invaded the air, which had suddenly grown darker. Heavy clouds trailed overhead. A few warning drops fell with a sharp scampering noise. The outer circle of walnut trees and privet hedges at Les Jardies burned with a denser lustrous green.

Monsieur de Balzac removed his absent gaze from the far distance and sighed again:

"I am tired. Only twenty pages done today. Why am I so tired?"

He rose slowly, dragging his feet, and sought refuge from his troubled thoughts in the untidy mass of papers piled before him.

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